Lafayette Historical Society NEWS Enlightening Our Community

Lafayette, California April 2024 Vol.51, No.2

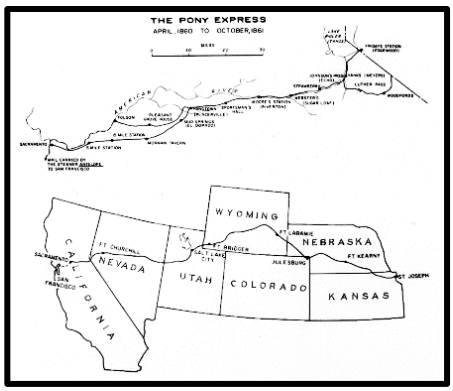
Located on the Lower Level of the Lafayette Library

THE PONY EXPRESS IN LAFAYETTE

The Pony Express has a short but romantic history and it included the town of Lafayette. Due to long delays in getting mail or any communication from Washington DC to California, a better mail service was needed for faster delivery. In 1845 it could take up to six months for mail to get to California by sea, shorter if the mail crossed by pack mule at the Isthmus of Panama. In 1860 it took 25 days for mail to go the southern route from St. Louis by way of El Paso, Texas on stagecoaches to Los Angeles, then San Francisco. After much searching, a central route that was almost due west was proposed. It was much shorter but its use in winter had yet to be proven.

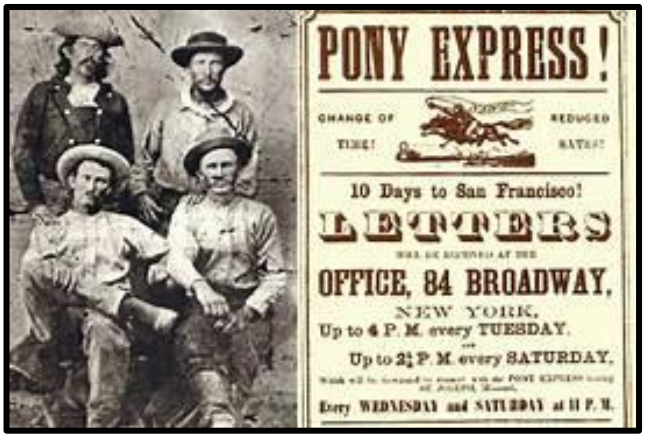
The reason for faster mail service included the rumblings of an impending Civil War. The government wanted to keep California and all its gold for the North. In addition, there were many people who had emigrated to the gold fields who wanted to keep in touch with relatives back home.

In the 1850s a company named Russell, Majors and Waddell was a freight outfitter to the Army and to travelers on the Oregon and Santa Fe trails. In 1857 they had a large financial loss after 54 of their wagons were destroyed in the Utah or Mormon War. The firm did not get reimbursed by the government which put them in shaky financial shape. The company hoped to make up for this with the contract to carry the mail to California. Their firm already had overland stage stations for mail and passenger service between the Missouri River and Salt Lake City.



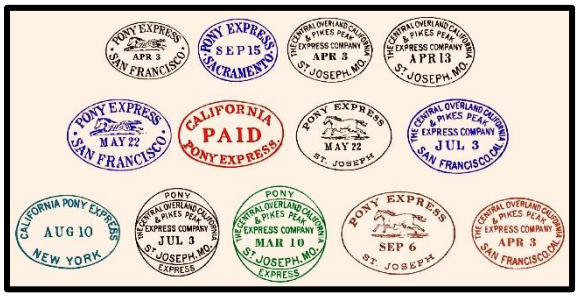
On January 27, 1860, William Russell learned that California Senator William Gwin was supporting a contract for California mail service. The service was contingent on its readiness by April and the delivery of mail in 10 days. The route would be a central route which would be open all year even in winter. Saving hundreds of miles the central route was needed as Texas was leaning towards the Confederate States and mail would not be able to be sent via El Paso. The last train stop and telegraph terminus from the east was in St. Joseph, Missouri. It was decided this would be the starting point for the express service. Russell, Majors and Wadell created a company named

the Central Overland California and Pikes Peak Express Company to set up relay stations (the COC&PP later became known to its employees as "Clean Out of Cash and Poor Pay"). Incredibly five geographic divisions were created, division managers hired, and over 150 relay stations between St. Joseph, Missouri and Sacramento were set up.


PONY EXPRESS!
CHANGE OF TIME!
REDUCED RATES!
10 Days to San Francisco!
LETTERS
OFFICE, 84 BROADWAY,
NEW YORK,
Up to 4 P. M. every TUESDAY,
Up to 2½ P. M. every SATURDAY,
Every WEDNESDAY and SATURDAY at 11 P. M.

Word went out that riders weighing less than 125 pounds who were of good character and could handle horses were to be hired for $50 to $100 a month. Station keepers, stock tenders, and eighty riders were hired. The stations were initially from 10 to 25 miles apart. Later stations were mostly 10 to 12 miles apart, about the distance that horses could gallop between stops. Riders were to ride 75-100 miles per day, day and night in all months of the year. Each rider was given a Bible and required to take an oath prohibiting fighting, drinking and profanity. The rider to become the most famous in his later years was Wild Bill Hickock.

The horses were to be less than 15.5 hands tall and weigh under 900 pounds. As these were small animals, they were often called ponies (hence the name Pony Express) but they were horses. It is believed that this group of horses cost $87,000 as they were of outstanding stock. Morgans, thoroughbreds and pintos were used on the eastern end. Smaller, tougher animals of California stock (mustangs) would be used for the rough mountains and deserts.



To keep weight down, the mail and special edition newspapers were printed on special lightweight paper and wrapped in oil skin for waterproofing. Telegrams, business letters and government dispatches were also sent. Initially a letter cost $5.00 per half ounce. Later the fare was reduced to $1.00. Letters were franked or post marked with a special hand stamp.

The saddles were of a special abbreviated design. The mail was placed in a mochila, a special rectangular piece of leather which was a saddle bag. There were 4 pockets at each corner which were locked for safety. The mochila had a hole for the saddle horn and it was thrown over the saddle at each relay station. The weight of the rider kept it in place. The mochila carried 20 pounds of mail and 20 pounds of personal effects. The rider could carry a bible, a knife, a horn to alert the station masters of their approach, and a gun. Later only water and a gun were carried.

On March 31, 1860, a special train carried 49 letters, 5 telegrams, and special edition newspapers from Washington DC and New York to St. Joseph, Missouri. At about 7 pm on April 3, 1860, after waiting around for hours for the train, the mail was put into the mochila and the rider left St. Joseph for points west. In SF on this same April 3 at 4 pm, James Randall left with 85 letters to board the Ship "the Antelope" at the wharf and traveled to Sacramento. There the mail was transferred to another rider and the eastbound overland service began.

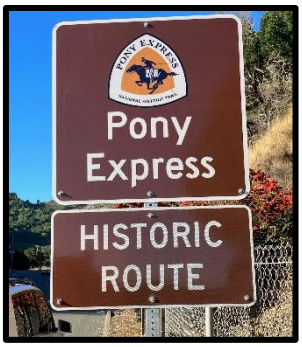
For the first part of 1860 there were weekly rides from each direction. There was a halt to operations for the Paiute Indian War from May to July 1860. Stations were destroyed and men killed between Salt Lake City, Utah and Carson City, Nevada. Once over, riders then started out twice a week, including winter, until October 1861. A total of 308 runs were made for a distance

of 616,000 miles. Lincoln's Inaugural Address in November 1860 made it from St, Joseph to Sacramento in 7 days, 17 hours.

Although it was easy for eastbound riders to make the boat connection in San Francisco, it was not for the westbound riders arriving in Sacramento. They were completing a long journey through all kinds of weather and Indian country so their timing was never exact. Riders often missed the boat which was to leave Sacramento at 2 pm on Saturday with no service Sunday. They then had to ride overland from Sacramento to Oakland where they took a ferry from Jack London Square to San Francisco. The route went through Davis, Fairfield, Cordelia, Benicia, by ferry to Martinez, Pacheco, Walnut Creek, Lafayette and on to Oakland.

Lafayette and these other towns became added stations. Lafayette House, run by N.P Lake, was the hotel and way station on the southwest corner of Mt. Diablo Blvd. and Moraga Road where a Pony Express monument stands today. The rider came from Martinez, changed horses in Lafayette, galloped through Orinda, over Fish Ranch Road, then down Claremont Avenue, Telegraph Avenue and Broadway. He then caught a ferry, the Oakland, for the crossing to San Francisco. After the first unofficial run through Lafayette, the Pony Express stopped twice more in 1860 and 17 times in 1861, always westbound.

The completion of the nationwide telegraph network in October 1861 doomed the Pony Express. Service ended shortly thereafter. The venture never panned out as a financial success and bankrupted the owners. However, the Pony Express contributed to the western frontier in many ways. The central route became the basis for telegraph service and the transcontinental railroad which was completed in 1869. Faster mail from east to west was now a reality. California's loyalty remained with the North in the Civil War. The memory and legend of the Pony Express far outlives the short time it was in service.



Several signs have been recently added along Highway 24 showing the approximate route of the Pony Express rider when he missed the ferry from Sacramento and had to come through Lafayette on his way to San Francisco. There are two signs on both east and west Highway 24 between Lafayette and the Caldecott Tunnel

LOUIS L. STEIN, COLLECTOR

"I always wanted to be a historian, but my father said they don't make any money. You go into business. So I did." Louis Stein

Louis L. Stein was a pharmacist in Kensington who bought thousands of photographs which he endowed to many historical societies and museums. This is his story.

Born in 1902 to German parents, Louis' father was a butcher at Shattuck Avenue and Vine Street in Berkeley. Louis was born, raised and schooled in Berkeley. In 1915 the family owned a cattle ranch near the present location of Acalanes High School. He spent summers at the ranch, growing vegetables, helping with the cattle, orchards, chickens, haying, and egg delivery. Louis studied chemistry for two years at UC Berkeley, an apprenticeship in pharmacy and some schooling at the California School of Pharmacology in San Francisco. He passed the pharmacist's exam in 1925.

In 1927 Stein married Mildred Slater whom he met at Cal. They lived in Kensington. Borrowing money from his mother-in-law, he opened the second business in Kensington, the Arlington Pharmacy with its soda fountain. In the beginning he worked long hours but as business improved he had some free afternoons. When his son Robert was 10, Stein attended a railroad lecture with him. At that time Stein got the bug for collecting. He began with all things railroad: photos and a 16 mm movie film of Berkeley streetcars. Negatives, lanterns, maps, stock certificates, model railroad cars, clippings, interviews, railroad spikes, books, conductor and engineer hats, signal lights and even two railcars were collected.

One railcar residing in back of Stein's home was Oakland's No. 2 horse car which traveled up and down Telegraph Avenue in 1887 and on University Avenue in Berkeley in 1893. Stein had a garage constructed for it. The car was used at the openings for BART in Berkeley and Hayward and for Cal's 100th Anniversary. It was sent to the Ardenwood Museum in Newark. The second was streetcar No. 352 on Oakland's East 21st Street. It ended up at the Western Railway Museum in Rio Vista. The front lawn sported a signal switch stand from the Nevada, California & Oregon railroads.

The Stein family, including daughter Janet, used to go to the Santa Fe Railway yards in Richmond on Sunday afternoons so her father and brother could roam the yards. She and her brother Bob admit that Louis had an obsession in collecting. But he also loved people, made friends wherever he went and loved to listen and tell stories of pioneer families.

Eventually when the railroad memorabilia became more difficult to find, Louis switched to Northern California history and eventually Contra Costa history. Some afternoons he would call on people and ask to copy or buy material. The pharmacy also had a darkroom, as this was before camera stores and digital photos. If needed, Stein could copy photos and return them. Known for his collecting, he also took many photographs, for comparison to his old photos and as documentation for the future.

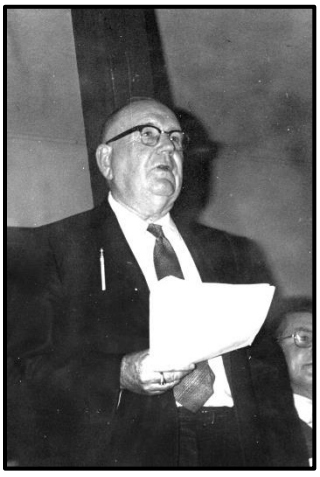
All of his collections were housed at his home. It had an attic which was packed everywhere. The basement and the garage housed items as well. The breadth of his memorabilia was stounding. He had collections from the coal mines in Nortonville, Somersville, Judsonville, and Stewartsville. When the East Bay Regional Park District wanted to reconstruct the building sites in Somersville, UC Berkeley contacted Stein for his photos.

In 1966, Stein rescued a 500 pound bell that hung from Contra Costa County's first courthouse built in 1853. He bought the bell at an auction, kept it for ten years and then donated it to the Martinez Historical Society. When he bought something, he didn't always know where it would end up, but he knew it needed to be saved.

Another impressive collection was the papers of Dr. John Marsh, the first American settler in Contra Costa County. There were coded telegrams for the sale of wheat with the accompanying codebooks, prices being confidential in those days.

As a pharmacist he also collected pharmaceutical novelties, glass bottles and medicines. He had such a wealth of material that he outfitted an old-time drug store in the gold rush town of Columbia and was asked for his expertise to set it up. He also advised Walt Disney in creating a drugstore on Main Street of Disneyland.

One of Stein's most famous acquisitions was the 1849 adobe house of Vincente Martinez, the second son of Don Ignacio Martinez in 1955. Developers were interested in buying the site and tearing down the house, once lived in by John Muir's daughter Wanda and adjacent to Muir's house in Martinez. Mildred and Louis purchased the house for $10,000 down on a $25,000 sale price. Stein helped restore it and rented it out to defray the cost of the loan. Eleven years later he sold it to the National Park Service for about the same amount and it became part of the John Muir Historic Site.



Stein won numerous awards and citations over the years. He was also on the boards of many historical societies and museums. He gave eight boxes of artifacts to the Oakland Museum when they began their collection.

He helped to found and guide the Contra Costa County Historical Society and in 1984 donated over 50,000 papers and books, 20,000 photographs and numerous slides, negatives and maps. He donated all of the Contra Costa County court documents in large bound books (ledgers that the county was discarding after having placed all the information on microfiche).

Stein paid for many of his acquisitions and then donated them to various historical societies including Lafayette Historical Society. And Stein didn't just collect, he knew the history of the photos, remembered where they were stored and could recall small details of each one.

Stein died in 1996. He will be remembered as a major contributor to the history community in the East Bay including photos to the Lafayette Historical Society.

MEMBERSHIP UPDATE 2024

Welcome to our new members and to those who have recently renewed their membership or have made a donation:

Nancy Goodmiller
Richard Silbert
Laura Torkelson
Carol Zischke
John Kennett
Len Holmes
Sande Hubbs
Phillip Smith
Shane Reisman
Carol Singer
Trudy Salter
Judith Jordan
Jennifer Rosen
Stu Swiedler
Frank Barham
Michelle Fanto-Chan
Rossmoor History & Culture Club
Sheila Guess
Glen Zamanian
The Parker Family
Jeff Crenshaw
Andrew Parrott
Paul Sheehan
The Flynn Family
Jane Minor
Kirk Allen
Allen Hopkins

Thank you for your support of the Lafayette Historical Society.

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP DUES

Your membership is exceedingly important as it makes it possible for our organization to pay annual rent to the City of Lafayette for our space and be able to pay for our phone, insurance, and other needed supplies. Donations are always appreciated.

Student Membership: $15 ~~ Individual Membership: $30 ~~ Family Membership: $60

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LHS
Board of Directors
2024
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Laura Torkelson
Michael Troutman

Return service requested

SHARE YOUR MEMORIES

Your memories tell the story of Lafayette. Memories of living and working in Lafayette are precious. Let us help you share those memories with others who value the town's history. Call us to set up a brief oral history phone interview with one of our friendly volunteers. Your stories, your laughter, and even your challenges offer a glimpse into the life that pulsates through Lafayette. Together we can preserve the vibrant narrative our our town for generations to come.

CALL 925-297-5397